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ABSTRACT

A case study examined the decision-making process that impelled a teacher to change her literacy instructional practices and the change process she went through when adopting new practices. The teacher (who has taught first grade for 5 years at an elementary school in a large Caribbean island school district) volunteered to try whole language approaches. Data included field notes of classroom observations, lesson plans and students' work for the last 2 years, and interviews with teachers and administrators. Data were analyzed within the hermeneutic phenomenological framework. Preliminary results indicated that: (1) the teacher began teaching using the principles learned in her college courses, including ability grouping and basal reading; (2) after teaching 3 years, she volunteered to try to teach using whole language methods because she was uncomfortable with her teaching; (3) the teacher's uncertainty about her change process arose from the frustrations encountered while making change and from the mixed messages she received from administrators; (4) during the second year of change, the teacher's confidence increased as she decided to let students be more responsible, attempted to get parents more involved, and became more involved in meeting with other faculty members; and (5) the teacher's beliefs are ahead of her classroom practices--little observational evidence exists to show that she is becoming more of a facilitator in the classroom. Further interviews and data analysis may shed light on the areas where practice has not followed stated beliefs. (Contains 14 references.) (RS)

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Research in Progress

Teacher in Transition: A Case Study of the Change Process from Skills-based to Whole Language Teaching

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Statement of the Problem

Some teachers are changing their instructional practices based on recent research into literacy instruction (Hunsaker & Johnston, 1992; Pace, 1992). They are changing their instruction to more holistic teaching practices often called whole language. Belief in the whole language philosophy and adoption of whole language practices requires that teachers make major changes in their teaching practices and beliefs. Because adoption of whole language theory and methods requires these changes, it is important to understand how a teacher arrives at the point of change and then goes on to make changes.

Studies about teachers changing to whole language teaching have been conducted with teachers who are enrolled in graduate courses (Hunsaker & Johnson, 1992; Newman, 1990; Pace, 1992; Sidani-Tabbaa & Davis, 1991) or involved in research projects (Wood, Cobb, & Yackel, 1991). However, studies looking at an individual teacher who had made a personal decision to change has not been extensively explored. Therefore, this study is looking at change in a teacher who makes a decision to change on her own.

Understanding how a teacher arrives at the point of change and then goes on to make changes will help us understand that process. It would help inform the research that is now telling us that someone who does not want to change will not change (Duffy & Roehler, 1986; Howser, 1989;

McLaughlin, 1987). Knowing why people change and how they change could help involve more reluctant teachers in the change process (Richardson, 1990).

If we understand how a person comes to the point of changing and makes a commitment to change, these understandings could be used to support teachers who are going through a change process. Understanding the qualities and skills needed to make on-going decisions about instructional practices that are based on research, may help teacher educators instill flexibility toward change in teachers.

Purpose of the Study

Because whole language is considered to be a grass-roots movement of teachers who read, reflect, and research to make personal decisions about changing their teaching (Goodman, 1986), it is important to understand how a teacher arrives at the point of change and understand the process the teacher goes through to make that change.

In this study, there is a dual focus that leads to understanding the change process using both the teacher's perspective and the participant observer's perspective. In this way, both emic, or insider's perspective, and etic, the researcher's viewpoints of the change process are investigated.

In order to study the change process in a teacher, two guiding research questions have been developed. They are:

1) What is the decision-making process that leads a teacher to change literacy instructional practices from skills-based to whole language instruction?

2) What is the change process a teacher goes through when adopting new practices?

Theoretical Framework

This study is being carried out under the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990). In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher goes beyond description of what is to interpretation of that experience. The phenomenological lens is appropriate in this study because the research questions center on portraying and interpreting the change process.

People make interpretations about reality based on their social interactions and their experiences (Lincoln, 1990). There are multiple interpretations of the known that are based on human actions and experiences (Van Manen, 1990). Understanding and interpreting lived experiences can be made through the interaction of the researcher and the individual being researched. Since interpretation is socially constructed (Van Manen, 1990), the researcher becomes part of the context being researched. The phenomenological question forces the researcher to become involved in the life of the researched, where they come together in a shared experience to interpret and understand that experience (Van Manen, 1990).

Methodology

While hermeneutic phenomenology is the theoretical frame for this inquiry, the form of the inquiry will be a case study. The case study format was chosen because it provides for "an intensive, in-depth examination" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 46) a phenomenon that involves the researcher in the context of the phenomenon using multiple data sources for evidence (Yin, 1989). This study is concerned with the nature of the change process in one teacher and investigates the phenomenon of change within the context where it is occurring using a variety of data sources. This case study will focus on describing and interpreting the lived experience of a teacher who is going through a change process.

Identification of Site

The site chosen for this study is an elementary school (grades K-6) in a large Caribbean island school district. There are 586 students in the school with 27 classroom teachers and 14 special subject and special education teachers. Many of the students come from low-income families as evidenced by all students in the school being entitled to the free lunch program. The school population is approximately seventy-five percent Black and twenty-five percent Hispanic. Most children in the school speak a Dutch Creole dialect of English, however there are children who come from homes where only Spanish is spoken. The literacy

achievement of the students attending this school is considered by the principals and teachers to be in need of improvement.

The principal and assistant principal are supportive of teachers' efforts to improve instruction and achievement. They are visible throughout the school and have encouraged teachers to try to improve their literacy teaching methods, although they have not mandated any special method. The principal was especially concerned with accountability through assessment, while the assistant principal decided to encourage teachers to try whole language teaching by asking for volunteers.

In the spring of 1992, nine teachers volunteered to try whole language in their classrooms. These nine teachers had a one-hour, in-service workshop in the spring of 1992 that introduced them to whole language instructional practices and resources. There was one other workshop at the school that introduced the teachers to whole group instruction in the fall. The volunteer group was to have met every month with the assistant principal to talk about issues involving whole language instruction, but met sporadically in the 1992-93 school year and not at all in the 1993-94 school year.

Although the teachers involved in the whole language group were encouraged to try whole language, the teachers have not had any consistent support to continue these new

practices. The assistant principal stated that the early workshops should have encouraged the teachers to begin self-study into whole language practices, however observations show that this carried through with only two of the teachers. Several teachers in the volunteer group expressed reluctance toward continuing whole language methods during the next year and only these same two teachers have continued.

Selection of Participant

I selected one of the two teachers who were involved in self-study and interested in continuing whole language practices in her class as the research study participant using the following criteria: (a) a teacher who had made a recent decision to change to whole language; (b) a teacher whose decision to change was based on personal factors and not influences from graduate courses or mandates from the school district or administrator; (c) a teacher who seemed interested enough in whole language instruction to continue for at least two years.

I have identified a teacher who has volunteered to work toward making a change in her instructional program and is continuing the change process into the next school year. She made the decision to begin working toward whole language instruction was made after some dissatisfaction with her teaching program.

Role of the Researcher

In an hermeneutic phenomenological study, the experiences of the researcher are often involved in developing research questions and interpreting data (Van Manen, 1990). Because of the importance of the researcher's experiences, I must state explicitly the experiences that have contributed to the formation of the research study and the interpretation of the data. While phenomenologists ask that researchers then "bracket" these experiences and keep them from interfering the research study, I believe that the personal insight of the researcher intertwines with the participant, and they work toward a shared understanding and meaning of all these experiences. Because the researcher becomes involved in the life of the researched, it is important to understand the background of the researcher just as it will be important to understand the background of the participant.

I had been a remedial reading teacher for fourteen years. As a remedial reading teacher, I began teaching using skills-based methods in a pull-out Title I program. Seven years ago, as a consequence of reading research articles and attending workshops, especially a week- long writing workshop put on by the Bay Area Writers, I began to adopt a more holistic view of literacy instruction. In the elementary school where I was the reading teacher, I decided to end my pull-out program and work on a school-wide writing

initiative. The main focus of this initiative was to provide process writing instruction to children while demonstrating these instructional strategies for their teachers. Through these demonstrations and formal and informal dialogue, the teachers were expected to use process writing on their own. However, I found it difficult for teachers to change the way they taught writing or change their beliefs about teaching writing. My interest in this study grew from the problems I encountered as I changed personally and when working as a change agent in literacy classrooms.

Data Collection

Data collection began during the spring 1993 semester to get a perspective of the teacher's reasons for wanting to change and her methods while she was changing instructional practices. An interview was conducted during the summer to illuminate the thought processes and actions of the teacher toward continued change. Data collection continued during the fall 1993 semester when further change was carried out. Data was collected from a variety of sources to triangulate the information collected.

Data Sources

A variety of data sources were chosen, not only for triangulation of sources to provide credibility to the findings and interpretations, but also to provide the dual perspectives of both the teacher and the researcher. In

order to get the teacher's perspective of the change process, three data sources were used. First, the teacher kept a reflective journal to describe her change process. Second, the teacher was involved with the researcher in a series of formal and informal interviews. The teacher also kept a log of professional reading completed, professional conferences attended, and formal or informal meetings where literacy instructional strategies were discussed.

To delineate the nature of the changes taking place in the classroom from the researcher's perspective, I collected data from four sources. First, I observed the class on a regular basis and kept field notes of those observations. I attended workshops with the teacher and read the articles and books she read. I collected copies of the teacher's lesson plans from last year and this year as well as samples of students' work from the two years. As a fourth data source, I interviewed people who had influenced her during this change process. I interviewed the assistant principal to discuss the differences in the teacher's instructional practices from observations in previous years. I also interviewed other teachers who have been identified by the participant as influencing her change process.

Data Analysis

Within the hermeneutic phenomenological framework, data analysis is based on reflection and interpretation that leads to understanding the essential meaning of a phenomenon

or experience. This is a circular process that takes the researcher back and forth between data and analysis. The analytic process is similar to reading and interpreting a narrative text. When reading a text, it is best understood by first reading through it in its entirety and thinking about the overall meaning derived from that first reading. It is then necessary to look for themes to support this global interpretation. These themes become the focal point for continued analysis. Once themes are formed, the text is read more closely to look for specific incidents and quotations that support the themes. The text is then understood more deeply.

For the data analysis in this study, narrative texts were written using the data sources to provide the descriptive narrative. The narrative was rewritten to include unfolding information from data collection. These narratives were shared with the participant who added comments or corrections as needed. This was done to include her interpretation and to provide alternative interpretations for consideration. When data collection is completed, the final narrative will be written, and the narrative test will be analyzed to identify themes.

In order to reach understanding and interpretation using this form of data analysis, themes are used to structure the experience in a meaningful way. After themes are identified, phrases from the whole are chosen that are

essential to supporting the theme. Then I will look line-by-line for specific instances of support. Writing is the final act in interpretation where the researcher takes theme statements and the supporting data to rewrite the narrative account.

The data are first analyzed as a whole, then broken into themes and supporting statements for further analysis, and then reorganized as based on the unfolding data. At the completion of data collection, the description and interpretation will be written and analyzed again using the same whole to part to whole process.

Preliminary Findings

In order to understand the decision-making process involved in changing instructional practices, it is important to learn about the background of the teacher.

Teacher Background

Ms. Houston, a 41-year-old teacher, started teaching at the age of 36 after being employed as a secretary in a school district office with the Title I reading program and then with a district-level parent involvement program. During her secretarial employment, she went to a local university part-time and completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education. Her first teaching position was that of primary music teacher for one year, and then she began teaching in first grade. She is still a first grade teacher in her fifth year of teaching. This summer Ms.

Houston was accepted to begin her masters program in education at the same university.

Teacher Education

The teaching methods Ms. Houston used when she first began teaching were influenced by her teacher education program. In her courses in teaching reading, she recalled being taught to teach reading in ability groups. She felt that reading groups were stressed. She had a course in teaching reading and then a course in language arts where reading was brought up again. She recalled that language arts instruction included reading as well as study skills and children's literature.

Teaching Methods Before Trying Whole Language

Ms. Houston began to teach using the principles learned in her college courses. She used ability grouping and the basal reading series adopted by the school district. She followed teachers' manuals explicitly, yet integrated some subjects because she did a paper in college on integrating the language arts with other subjects. She kept thinking about having all the students read from the same reading book and having them write about what they read because of how she was taught. However, since this had not been taught to her in her college classes, she did not do these things when she first began to teach.

As she heard and read about whole language, she felt that it described some of the things she was thinking of

doing and began to try some writing and integration in her classroom. Students had to take mastery tests that came with the basal readers, so Ms. Houston continued to use the basal and ability grouping to meet school requirements. At this point, she did not consider herself a whole language teacher.

The Decision-Making Process

In the spring of 1992, after Ms. Houston had been teaching first grade for 3 years, the assistant principal asked for volunteers to try whole language in their classrooms. Ms. Houston volunteered to become a part of a group of nine volunteers who wanted to try to teach using whole language methods because she was uncomfortable with her teaching.

Ms. Houston's decision-making process was characterized by a general dissatisfaction with her teaching. This dissatisfaction is a theme that was seen as Ms. Houston reflected on the decision-making process. She felt that something "was missing" (journal 11/20/93) from her teaching. She had a generalized dissatisfaction with her instructional practices. She felt that although the students were making progress, she did not feel that she was doing all that she could. In her journal she stated that she was not as effective "as she dreamed she would be" (journal 11/20/93) when she decided to become a teacher. She felt that following the basal and other text manuals

page-by-page was not as effective as teaching could be. She said she was looking "to change" (journal 11/20/93), but until the assistant principal asked for volunteers to get involved with whole language, she wasn't sure what that change would be.

During the summer, she began to read about whole language instruction and it appealed to her. She was drawn to the ideas presented because she already had an interest in teaching writing in first grade, and also the integration of the various subjects. She liked the idea of using children's literature and decided she was definitely going to try whole language practices in the fall of 1992. This decision-making process was described by her to be the "turning point" (interview 11/24/93) of her teaching career.

The Change Process-A Preliminary Interpretation

Several themes can be seen in this teacher's change process. The first theme seen in the change process was one of uncertainty. This uncertainty arose from the frustrations and difficulties encountered while making changes in instructional practices and from the mixed messages that she was receiving from her administration. As this second year progressed, this uncertainty was replaced with a noticeable growth in knowledge and self-confidence.

While this growth was evident, it was not a smooth linear upward growth, but rather a roller-coaster type of movement. There were ups and downs throughout the process,

yet the process moved forward. In the first year, when there were doubts about children's progress, out came the worksheets and the basals. Ms. Houston continually questioned the progress of a few low students who, she felt, needed skills instruction. She had difficulty moving away from this idea.

She was also receiving mixed messages from her administrators. The principal was interested in visible results on assessment instruments, especially in reading. The reading teachers in the school were asked to test all children using the criterion-referenced tests that accompanied the basal, yet the assistant principal was talking about whole language and portfolios. Ms. Houston planned activities using children's literature and then was asked to send students for tests in the various basal levels. This would cause Ms. Houston to go back into the basals to "cover" the skills to be tested. This was a source of frustration throughout the 1992-93 school year. End of year testing was also going to be done so Ms. Houston felt compelled to teach skills in the way they were going to be tested. She stated that she would not be teaching her "whole language way" (field notes, 6/2/93) for the balance of the year to prepare students for end of year testing and for the type of reading they would be doing in second grade.

Further Decision-Making

Decisions made by Ms. Houston over the summer,

confirmed her growing confidence. This confidence was especially evidenced in the changes she planned for the second year.

When asked what she would be doing differently from the 92-93 school year, Ms. Houston said she wanted to let the students be more responsible and more involved. She wanted to be more of a facilitator instead of "being up front telling [the students] what to do" (interview 7/26/93). She thought she would ask students what they wanted to learn about a theme and base her teaching on their responses and the needs of the students.

Ms. Houston decided that she would not use the basal as the basis of her reading program. She decided to use the basal only if it tied in with the themes being used. She felt she had learned enough from last year's efforts and from her readings to explain things to the principal and reading teacher. She was going to implement portfolios for assessment purposes instead of getting involved in the reading tests.

Ms. Houston wanted to get parents more involved in the class and planned on having meetings and sending home letters to explain whole language and to explain why there would be no workbooks. She also wanted parents to understand her homework policy which was to have parents listen to their children read every day. She felt she would involve parents in doing research at home with their

children.

Ms. Houston decided to be more involved in meeting with other faculty members. She thought it was important to share and to learn from each other. A second grade teacher told her that, traditionally, teachers tended to keep things to themselves, yet they should be sharing, and she agreed.

She gained confidence in her abilities when an administrator asked if she would share ideas when school started in the fall. This administrator was pleased with her development of thematic units and wanted her to present her planning proces with other faculty members. Ms. Houston also felt that she could share information she gained from doing her own research and readings. She gathered information about whole language from various journals and also from hand-outs from workshops to organize and possibly share with others.

Changes-Fall 1993

Ms. Houston has made some changes according to her summer decision-making. Yet, I see a theme for this year being one of revision. I see Ms. Houston moving ahead, yet revising and building on last year's practices without major change. However, she has stopped using the basal reader and has asked parents to send money to school to buy trade books instead of workbooks. Ms. Houston used this money to buy multiple copies of trade books to use in class, and then each child will take a book home at the end of the year.

Parents have responded enthusiastically to this idea after it was explained how the books would be used. Ms. Houston also invited parents to a morning meeting to explain her reading program. Most parents attended, and Ms. Houston felt they were supportive. She also sent a letter outlining the reading program to those parents who did not attend.

From my perspective, Ms. Houston's beliefs, as stated in the interviews and in informal conversations, seem to be ahead of her classroom practices. This is one aspect of Ms. Houston's teaching that we have not yet explored together, therefore the following statements are based solely on my observations. I expect to make revisions in this area.

Ms. Houston stated that she wanted the students to be more involved in the classroom, and she wanted to be more of a facilitator, yet there is little observational evidence of that taking place. The class has changed to be set up so that students can get their own materials, such as crayons, pencils, etc., Ms. Houston does not allow students to move freely around the room to get these materials. She passes them out or asks a student to pass them out when needed. In class discussion, she says "That's not quite what I'm looking for" (11/5/93) in response to a student's answer, or she will give very specific instructions about how to complete a drawing or literature response. She will say "I want to see you write about things that come in two's because we read a book about two friends. Be sure that the

things you write about must always come in twos" (11/24/93). These examples show that Ms. Houston has stated beliefs that are not yet in evidence in her classroom practice. However, she is revising and moving forward in other areas where changes have already been made.

Continued Research

In future interviews, I hope to discuss the areas where practice has not followed stated beliefs. I will ask Ms. Houston how she has become more of a facilitator and how she sees children having more involvement in her class. I will continue to look for examples of her following this belief.

Another area I want to explore is her view of the change process. I feel that Ms. Houston's journal and our interviews have not explored the depth of her feelings. She has agreed to read about the change processes of other teachers and then compare her change process to theirs. I hope that we will then have more lengthy discussions about the change process itself. I feel that the stories of others can increase insights into her own experience. Reading about the experiences of others can also help someone recall areas they had forgotten. Discussion with another can then probe recall of experiences and help develop understandings about those experiences.

This study will be completed in January, 1994. At this time, final interviews will be conducted and data analysis will be competed. When the analysis is complete, this study

will provide not only a picture of the decision-making process of this teacher, but also insight into that process. This study will then describe and interpret a one-year change process.

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